

## PARENT/CHILD COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX: MORALS, VALUES, AND PARENTING SKILLS

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**H**aving worked as a reproductive health professional for more than two decades in cross-cultural settings in Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, the Caribbean, and Central America, I find it disturbing and sobering that many sexuality educators are still uncomfortable with encouraging family discussions about sexuality within culturally defined roles.

Parents and other caregiving adults face formidable challenges in parenting. Even those who are well informed find it difficult to know what and how much information to give to young people about sexuality and at what age to give it. Their task is made that much more difficult by the influence of the media and popular culture, from which young people take their cues about “acceptable” sexual behavior.

While reproductive health professionals promote efforts to make sexuality education more widely available, we often overlook flaws within our own programs that contribute to the dilemma parents confront when trying to educate their children about sex. One might argue that most sexuality education curricula address morals and family values and feature them prominently in the programs; in practice, however, many educators are reluctant to facilitate discussions of these issues. This, in turn, restrains the free flow of ideas and precludes honest discussion.

Though not always obvious to laypersons, this problem is painfully clear to those educators in the field who struggle with the conflict between providing factual information about sexuality and ensuring that values are clarified in line with personal, family, and community norms and attitudes. Discussion of religious beliefs and moral codes, which help govern behavior and decision making, strengthens sexuality education programs by increasing the weight of the factual information provided.

There is also a growing awareness in the young adult reproductive health field that parents and other adults raising young people need basic parenting skills to help them tackle an array of child-rearing issues and that having good parenting skills is essential for providing sexuality education in the home. In one workshop, for example, a single mother of four teenaged girls expressed her concerns for her daughters this way: “I wish my daughters would delay having sex until they’re older. But I can’t compete with the rest of the world when I have to worry about keeping a roof over our heads, so I just tell them to make sure they use a condom.”

It is clear from this parent’s response that her personal values are at odds with the advice she gave her daughters. And, while the recommendation to use a condom was certainly positive, the underlying

economic pressures had a more serious impact on the message.

If we educators truly want to enhance communication about sexuality among family members, we should reexamine how we approach this subject. We have to ensure that sexuality educators are tolerant and well prepared to facilitate discussions about morals, ethics, and religious and family values even when those values conflict with their own. Educators must understand that effective communication about sexuality or any other subject can operate only within a framework of personal values and good parenting skills.

To accomplish these tasks, funders and program planners must recognize the need for long-term parenting interventions and be willing to provide the necessary support toward this effort. Then we can work to improve overall parenting skills, increase family members' comfort levels when discussing sexuality, and integrate morals and family values into parenting skills.

A resource for helping educators reach this goal, *Christian Family Life Education: A Resource Guide for Facilitators Working in Adolescent Sexuality and Reproductive Health*, has been drafted and is being adapted for training facilitators from religious institutions and parenting organizations in Jamaica.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Support parenting skills workshops. These workshops:

- help build parents' confidence, address internal and external pressures, and help raise awareness of the

significant role that words play in the decision-making process;

- give parents—and other adults important to young people—an opportunity to discover their own parenting styles and learn what shapes young people's personalities;
- help parents learn how to motivate, discipline, and communicate effectively with their children;
- provide practical time management techniques to help parents cope with life's daily pressures.

Parenting skills programs can be promoted through many different kinds of community groups: social clubs; religious organizations; schools; health centers; social service agencies; and family courts, for example. Flyers, mailings, posters, and recommendations from past participants are all effective methods for advertising workshops.

### RESOURCES:

Oliver-Miller, Shirley. *Christian Family Life Education: A Resource Guide for Facilitators Working in Adolescent Sexuality and Reproductive Health* (forthcoming 2002).

Planned Parenthood of New York City. "Hey, What Do I Say? A Parent-to-Parent Guide on How to Talk with Your Children about Sexuality."

Tugum-Kolma, E. 2000. Pastors preach population, change lives. *Populi*. September 27 (2): 13-15.

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